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Ruthless Oppressors? Unraveling the Myth About the Spanish Inquisition

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Abstract

From its inception to the present, critics of the Spanish Inquisition have characterized the institution as omnipotent and oppressive and highlighted its role in the expulsion, forced conversion, and execution of supposed heretics. The latter perception is misleading. Revisionist historians by the 1960s dismissed the latter portrayal and offered a more objective description of the institution. A careful analysis of Inquisition records and secondary literature reveals that the Spanish Inquisition was less powerful and more benign than previously characterized.

Creating the Myth

Opponents of the Spanish Inquisition have dominated the narrative of its past. All told, these critics left the impression of a terrible institution that loomed over the Spanish Empire. According to one of these critics, so powerful and oppressive was the Inquisition that:
...it taught the savages of India and America to shudder at the name of Christianity..., and that the fear of its

introduction froze the earlier heretics of Italy, France, and Germany into orthodoxy... It arrested on suspicion, tortured till confession, and then punished by fire. Two witnesses... were sufficient to consign the victim to a loathsome dungeon. Here he was sparingly supplied with food, forbidden to speak... and left to himself till famine and misery should break his spirit... [If he confess to heresy,] whether innocent or not, he might then assume the sacred shirt, and escape with the confiscation of all his property. If he persists to avow his innocence, Inquisitors brought him to the torture chamber deep within the ground so no one could hear him wail. The victim, whether man, matron, or tender virgin—was stripped naked and stretched upon the wooden bench. Water, weights, fires, pulleys, screws—all the apparatus by which the sinews could be strained without cracking, the bones bruised without breaking, and the body racked exquisitely without giving up its ghost—was now put into operation. The executioner, enveloped in a black robe from head to foot, with his eyes glaring at his victim through holes cut in the hood, practiced successively all the forms of torture which the devilish ingenuity of the monk had invented.¹

Protestant critics used the Inquisition myth to further the conflict between Catholics and Protestants. During the sixteenth-century Catholic and Protestant leaders were involved in bloody struggle over the beliefs, territories, and wealth of Western Europe. In 1572, twelve hundred Protestants in the Netherlands were slaughtered by Catholic troops after Protestants revolted against their Spanish sovereign.² In 1588, King Philip II of Spain sent his infamous armada to

England and came close to conquering the kingdom of the nominally Protestant King, Henry VII.³ In order to bolster support against Spain, the preeminent defender of the Catholic cause, Protestants highlighted the Spanish Inquisition's malign achievements and warned their Protestant readers that they could be the Inquisition's next victims, if they allowed the Pope and the King of Spain to rule over them.

English and American historians affirmed the Protestant account three hundred years later. By the 1820s, Spain, with the backing of post-Napoleonic France and Imperial Russia, had plans of restoring its former colonies.⁴ Motivated by this proposed invasion, historians and novelists in England and America wrote narratives describing the persecution and subjugation of Catholics and Jews in Spain and its colonies, which persuaded readers of the need to emancipate them from Spain's tyranny.⁵ Backed with proof from Inquisition records and other corroborative sources, they blamed the intolerance of the Spanish state and Catholic Church for establishing a "reign of terror" which devastated the lives of thousands.⁶ Jewish scholars writing during the rise of Fascism in Europe also portrayed the Inquisition in a similar fashion and emphasized the anti-Semitic attitude of Spanish and Catholic authorities. Cecil Roth held this view: in his monograph, *The Spanish Inquisition*, he stated that the ruthlessness of the Spanish Inquisition "nearly fulfilled its objective of having exterminated or else cowed into subjection the native Spanish Judaizers."⁷

Although long extinct the Inquisition still has critics highlighting its brutal past. One only has to type in the word "Spanish Inquisition" on the Internet to find out its newest opponents

and their reasons for disgracing the history of Spain and the Roman Catholic Church.⁸

To an extent, the Inquisition's opponents have a valid claim in portraying Spain, the Catholic establishment, the Inquisition as brutal and oppressive. After all, Spain and the Roman Catholic Church did support the Inquisition and the Inquisition did persecute individuals base on their religious beliefs. In accordance with trial procedures outlined in Inquisitorial manuals, not only was the accused kept in the dark of who had accused them, Inquisitors could—but not necessarily—torture the accused if they refuse to incriminate themselves.⁹ Although they did not perform the actual burning of convicted heretics, Inquisitors were responsible for sanctioning the execution of individuals, which was carried out by secular authorities. In 1559-1566, considered by Protestant as the bloodiest period of Protestant repression, the Spanish Inquisition sentenced over a hundred Lutheran heretics to death.¹⁰ In the late-eighteenth-century, another hundred plus individuals of Jewish and Portuguese decent were burnt alive or in effigy.¹¹ Many more convicted heretics were executed during the Inquisition's existence.

Unraveling the Myth

But the literature of its opponents is misleading. Missing from their literature was the actions of other tribunals that were just as brutal—if not more sadistic—than the Inquisition in Spain. The Inquisition in Spain was not the only tribunal in early-modern Europe that allowed the use of torture and sentenced individuals to death base on their religious beliefs. Lord Burghley, a

contemporary of the Inquisition, justified the torture of Catholics because the accused refused to incriminate themselves.¹² While the Spanish Inquisition condemned over a hundred individuals to death during the period of 1559-1566, the English authorities under Queen Anne executed three times as many heretics during the same time period, and the French under Henry II at least twice as many.¹³ In the Netherlands, ten times as many were executed.¹⁴

Actual Inquisition records either completely dismiss or at least moderate the assertions made by its opponents. Whereas the Protestant, Raimundo Gonzales de Montes, claimed that the Inquisition stripped every accused heretic of all their wealth and property, the trial record of Inés López, presented in *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Sources*, revealed how she only paid a fine to be released from prison—only on the second trial in which she was convicted again for heresy, was her property confiscated.¹⁵ Also, judges in López's trial did not accept every testimony against the defendant.¹⁶ In her second trial, López's attorney, afforded to her by the tribunal, was given fifteen days to produce a list of questionable witnesses that may have accused her out of enmity.¹⁷ Thus, she was given an opportunity to defend her innocence—a far cry from the rash and malevolent judges in Montes' account that considered the accused doomed to torture and death once they were imprisoned.¹⁸

The trial records of Bartolomé Sánchez, presented in Sara Tilghman Nalle's *Mad For God*, also presented a different impression of the Inquisition.¹⁹ In contrast to the powerful behemoth

that hovered over Spanish society, she discovered an institution that rarely disrupted the daily activities of communities. In the tribunal of Cuenca, she noted that the chief Inquisitor, Pedro Cortes, nor any of his subordinates, hardly left their desk at work.²⁰ Rather than barge in the homes of suspicious individuals and coerce them to confess of heresy, these Inquisition officials sat in their chairs behind their desk at the office and examined reams full of paper work of unfinished court cases.²¹ So under-funded and undermanned was Cortes' tribunal, that they were still work on the court cases of deceased suspects. Only once in the period of six-months did Inquisitor Cortes bother to incarcerate and question a denounced heretic.²²

The heretic that Inquisitor Cortes questioned was Bartolomé Sánchez, a poor and unemployed laborer with visions of being the second Messiah of God. Sánchez was arrested after he repeatedly disrupted Mass with his heretical tirades and for denouncing the Catholic establishment as the work of Satan at various locations in Cuenca.²³ Rather than condemned the self-proclaimed Messiah to death for his blatant heretical beliefs, Cortes gave him a month and a half to repent so he can acquit him and not condemn him to the fire. Cortes even debated with Sánchez on the merits of Catholicism in order to persuade him back into the Catholic fold. "Patiently" he repeated to Sánchez the meaning of the cross and pleaded with him to cross himself before the trinity and repent for his misplaced conviction so that he could acquit him and allow him to take care of his wife and children.²⁴ Sánchez retracted from his belief and was released from prison. But he went back to prison for reverting

back to his Messianic ways. Again, he was acquitted but was arrested again for the same offense. On his third trial, Sanchez was spared from being burnt at the stake on account that he was insane.²⁵ Instead of burning Sanchez, the Inquisitors sent him to a mental hospital with the hope that doctors there could cure his illness.²⁶

The monographs of revisionists influenced Nalle's case study. Prior to revisionist literature, scholars like Henry Charles Lea and Cecil Roth affirmed the legend of a merciless monolith that terrorized Spain by citing evidence from the Inquisition records. But these scholars misconstrued the facts. When they looked at the Inquisition records they only focused on the cases that resulted in the bankruptcy or execution of convicted heretics. They neglected to mention the less severe and more prevalent penalties handed down by the Inquisition. Nor did they mention instances in which Inquisitors spoke out against the discrimination and violence plaguing Spanish society. Someone studying the United States judicial system could make the same mistake, if he were to judge the institution base on the thousands it has sentenced to death over the past two centuries and the racist policies that it has upheld, which unfairly subjected Africans into slavery and the Chinese to the status of perpetual foreigners (i.e. the fifty year Chinese Exclusion act). But such an assessment of the US federal and state court system is misleading. It does not account for the actions of Judges and lawyers who fought against such discriminatory policies and the countless of cases in which the courts refrained from draconian measures.

Revisionist recognized these errors in previous Inquisition

historiography. While they do not deny that discrimination occurred, torture was used, and death sentences were handed down, they disagreed with how previous scholars have manipulated the facts and magnified the power and severity of the institution. Contrary to the bloodthirsty Inquisitors of previous literature, they noted that it rarely tortured and condemned their prisoners to death. While Inquisition manuals allowed the use of torture, Richard Kagan and Abigail Dyers discovered that the Inquisitors in Spain sparingly used torture and by the seventeenth-century some of its judges discounted the use of torture entirely.²⁷ In the tribunal of Valencia of 1566-1609, out of the approximately 3,075 convicts, only 2 percent were burned, the rest were either humiliated in public, whipped, fined, or had their case suspended.²⁸ According to another estimate, which considered the actions of nineteen tribunals over the period of 1540-1700, under two percent of the accused were executed.²⁹

Revisionist like Henry Kamen emphasized how few in number were the Inquisitors. For every district the size of Rhode Island or Delaware, there were only two or three Inquisitors (who were either a trained theologian or jurist), an assessor, a constable, and a prosecutor, with a few other necessary subordinates.³⁰ How can two or three Inquisitors with perhaps, ten subordinates impose a reign of terror on a region the size of Delaware? Or thirty or forty Inquisitors terrorized the entire Iberian Peninsula? Contrary to the Inquisition officials "cloaked in virtual inviolability," Kamen argued that the Inquisition relied on the testimony and support of local communities.³¹ Without their testimony and support, the Inquisition was ineffective. While the

majority of the locals in Toledo welcomed and supported the Inquisition and readily denounced their political rivals, Catalonians jailed their Inquisitors and afterwards, honored the mayor who led the imprisonment with music and banquet.³² In the city of Tarragona, municipal leaders barred Inquisitors from entering their city as the Inquisition fled from a plague.³³ For the most part, communities tolerated the Inquisition because it barely intruded in their lives; only in 1834, amidst mounting liberal opposition, was the Inquisition completely abolished from Spain.³⁴

On some occasions the Inquisition even played a mitigating role against unwarranted discrimination against minority groups. Stephen Haliczer made this argument in his study of the tribunal in Valencia:

By contrast with the Old Christian (Christians who claim to have no Jewish or Muslim ancestry) demand for discrimination against all *conversos* on the basis of their Jewish background, the Inquisition provided a rational means for distinguishing the sheep and the goats in the *converso* community. The Inquisition would punish *converso* Judiazers with fines and confiscation and bar them from public offices, but simultaneously would confirm the orthodoxy of the rest, thereby guaranteeing them immunity from further attack.³⁵

By the 1600s some Inquisitors even protested against the racial discrimination dividing their nation. According to one of these advocates, Juan Roco Campofrio, such unfair policies were a “source of moral and political scandal in the nation” and that

they were the cause of the outrages and quarrels “that was responsible for over ninety percent of the civil and criminal trials in Spanish courts.”³⁶ If this policy of racial discrimination continued, he went on to say, “then the greater part of Spanish society would soon be branded as impure, and the only remaining guarantee of Old Christian blood would be one’s plebian origin.”³⁷

Conclusion

Those who control the production of history shape our understanding of the past, regardless of whether the narrative is accurate or not.³⁸ The conflict over the nature of the Inquisition in Spain is an example of this power-struggle. From its inception to the present, critics of the Inquisition have used the Inquisition to disgrace Spain and the Catholic establishment. They generated a story about the Inquisition’s invincibility and blamed Spain and the Papacy for supporting its malign achievements. But the blame placed on Spain, the Catholic establishment, and the Inquisition is inaccurate. Their opponents singled out the Inquisition in Spain, exaggerated its intolerance, and silenced the benign role that some of its officials played. Although intolerant by design, the Inquisition in Spain was not an omnipotent institution that terrorized Spain. While it did prosecute, penalized, and even condemned individuals to the fire base on their religious beliefs, its officials did not ruthlessly torture and execute every suspected heretic who came to their courts. Instead, the Inquisition was an institutionalized version of the popular prejudices of Spanish society and its Inquisitors, hired from within the same society, either shared or abhorred its values. At their

worse, Inquisitors exploited societal prejudices and deliberately ended or made the lives of hundreds miserable; at their best, Inquisitors mitigated or moderated the intolerance of society and prevented unwarranted acts of discrimination.

Rather than use the Inquisition as a tool for denouncing the ills of Spain and the Catholic establishment, it should be seen as a paradigm for other nations that has institutionalized the fear and prejudices of its citizens. Before it became an intolerant nation, Spain was once a diverse and tolerant society, which fostered the co-existence between Muslims, Christians, and Jews. How and why did such a cosmopolitan society become so intolerant? What prompted the questioning and changing of one's belief to become a crime?

Understanding the Inquisition in Spain in those terms may offer some insight into other previous and current phenomenon of institutionalized bigotry.

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¹ Henry Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition: A Historical Revision*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 306-307.

² 305-309, Kamen, 1997.

³ Henry Kamen, *Empire: How Spain Became A World Power 1492-1763*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2003), 511-512, 318.

⁴ J.D. Richardson, ed., *Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, vol. 2 (1907), 287.

⁵ The novel, *Ivanhoe*, by Sir Walter Scott and Washington Irving's *Conquest of Granada* were among the novelist to characterize the institution in that manner. 311, Kamen.

⁶ The American scholar, Henry Charles Lea, was among these historians. In his 1897 essay "Lucero the Inquisitor," Lea blamed the Holy Office and the state which supported it for establishing a "reign of terror" that spread throughout the entire peninsula in which hundreds, if not thousands, lost their lives and

property during the tyranny of inquisitor Diego Lucero. "Lucero horrified the land by gathering evidences" of a vast conspiracy that the Jews and *conversos* (Jews who converted to Christianity) were secretly planning to overthrow

Christendom and reestablish the kingdom of Israel in its place. So in an effort to prevent the supposed plot, a "horde of [inquisition] officials clothed in virtual inviolability (because King Ferdinand supported their actions), was let loose upon a defenseless population. The "reign of terror" only ended when masses of exasperated Spaniards, from the poor to the wealthy, rose up against the crown, demanding that Lucero be punished for the Inquisition's atrocities. Henry Charles Lea, *ALucero the Inquisitor*, @ *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 2, No.4 (July, 1897), 614-615, 618, 623-624.

⁷ Cecil Roth, *The Spanish Inquisition*. The Norton Library, New York, 1968. 133

⁸ See the following for examples: Jason L. Slade "The Spanish Inquisition," August 6, 1996, The Bible Study

<http://www.bibletopics.com/biblestudy/64.htm> and Jewish News of Greater Phoenix, "Critics contend Pope's Apology Ignored Holocaust and Inquisition," 10 Adar II, Vol. 52, No. 28, March 17, 2000,

<http://www.jewishaz.com/jewishnews/000317/pope.html>

⁹ *Inquisitorial Inquiries: Brief Lives of Secret Jews and Other Heretics* edited and Translated by Richard L. Kagan and Abigail Dyer, (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 38-61

¹⁰ 98, Kamen

¹¹ *ibid*, 300-301

¹² William S. Maltby, *The Black Legend In England: The development of anti-Spanish sentiment, 1558-1660*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1971), 41.

¹³ 98, Kamen

¹⁴ *ibid*.

¹⁵ *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Sources*. Edited by Olivia Remie Constable, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 334-335.

¹⁶ Gonzalez de Montes, Raimundo. *A discoverie and plaine declaration of sundry subtil practices of the Holy Inquisition of Spaine and the originall thereof: with certain speciall examples set apart by themselves... wherein a man may see the foresaid practices of the Inquisition, as they bee practiced and exercised, very lively described*. London: Printed for Iohn Bellamie,

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¹⁷ 336-337, *Medieval Iberia*

¹⁸ 11-12, Montes

¹⁹ Sarah Tilghman Nalle, *Mad For God:
Bartolomé Sánchez, The Secret Messiah of
Cardenete*. (Charleston and London: University
Press of Virginia, 2001)

²⁰ *ibid*, 25

²¹ *ibid*, 27-28

²² *ibid*.

²³ 15-21, 24, Nalle

²⁴ *ibid*, 26-54

²⁵ *ibid*, 138-144

²⁶ *ibid*, 158-161

²⁷ 17-18, *Inquisitorial Inquiries*

²⁸ 199, Kamen

²⁹ *ibid*, 198-199

³⁰ *ibid*, 144

³¹ 618, Lea

³² 74, Kamen

³³ *ibid*, 165

³⁴ *ibid*, 304

³⁵ ACastillian Urban Patriciate and the Jewish
Expulsion of 1480-1492.@ *The American
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³⁶ 249, Kamen

³⁷ *ibid*, 250-251

³⁸ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past:
Power and Production of History*. (Boston:
Beacon Press, 1995), 23, 26.